

# Statement condemning the attack on Advocate Sudha Bhardwaj

**We** are publishing here a statement by more than 100 intellectuals condemning the attack on democratic dissent and protest. - Editor

We the undersigned wish to place on record our utter disgust, contempt and outrage at the latest in the series of machinations by Republic TV, working to its brief as a propagandist for the ongoing crusade against all those who take public stands in defence of democracy, secularism, human rights, Constitutional propriety and rule of law.

Republic TV's latest target is Advocate Sudha Bharadwaj, National Secretary of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Vice President of the Indian Association of Progressive Lawyers and Visiting Professor at the National Law University Delhi. She is widely-known for her three decades of work as a trade unionist, human rights defender, environmental lawyer and a respected advisor to several state institutions including the state legal aid bodies and the National Human Rights Commission.

According to Republic TV, this committed and dedicated lawyer and activist is an "urban Maoist" who is "plotting to break India" with separatist groups and armed guerrillas across the country. The basis for the long list of scurrilous allegations and malicious insinuations against Advocate Bharadwaj is a letter purported to be written by her that Republic TV claims it has accessed.

The provenance of this letter is not revealed and we are not told how it came into the possession of Republic TV. The language of the letter is crude and clumsy, with the supposed author self-identifying as "Comrade Advocate Sudha Bharadwaj" and mentioning the names of various known and unknown individuals who are meticulously addressed as "Comrades". The contents – or rather, what Republic TV claims are the contents – are supposed to establish a "sensational" connection between the Kashmiri separatists, "urban Naxals", students from JNU and TISS, and others who take public stands against the anti-people policies of the state. According to Republic TV, these are "incontrovertible and unquestionable facts" that cannot be questioned.

Based on the telecast, the alleged letter belongs to the shoddy archive of similar "documentary proofs" that are regularly leaked to the press by investigation agencies eager to pin various "crimes" onto activists, leaders of people's movements, political opponents, human rights defenders, critics of government policies and other citizens who are exercising their legitimate rights to free speech, dissent and political action.

The frenzied propagation by Republic TV of these concocted allegations and invented charges against known critics of the ruling party is clearly aimed at blurring the lines between evidence and allegation, accusation and proof, coincidence and causality in the mind of viewers who do not have access to multiple sources of information. Equally dangerous is the creation and demonisation of virulent labels like "urban naxals" and "tukde-tukde gang", which gain currency solely by virtue of insistent repetition and circulation, despite being legally, factually and politically untenable.

The lethal consequences of this shameless manipulation of public opinion are today visible in the form of the targeted lynching's of Muslims, Dalits and others identified as criminals based on malevolent WhatsApp messages and videos. Ludicrous though this attack on Advocate Bharadwaj may seem, it is also a signal of the widening dragnet being used to establish absolute control over all institutions and spaces of governance. We call on all responsible people to condemn and expose this attack as the latest attempt by the Modi sarkar and its embedded propagandists in the media to bypass democratic institutions, undermine the rule of law, stifle all voices of dissent and crush all those who seek to question or challenge their autocratic rule. We also call on media bodies, professional associations and senior journalists to come out and condemn practitioners of this form of toxic, unethical and malicious "journalism".

\*\*\*